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THE GREEK APOLOGISTS OF THE SECOND CENTURY

REV. W. FAIRWEATHER, M.A.
Kirkcaldy, Scotland

“Apostolic Fathers” is the title usually given to those early Christian writers who came, or might have come, into direct contact with the apostles. As the death of John, the last survivor of the apostolic band, took place about the end of the first century, the name is therefore applicable to all those living at or prior to that date whose works are still extant. These include Barnabas,¹ the companion of Paul (Acts 4:36, etc.); Hermas (Rom. 16:14); Clement, bishop of Rome (Phil. 4:3); Ignatius, bishop of Antioch; Polycarp, a disciple of John, and bishop of Smyrna; Papias, likewise a disciple of John, and bishop of Hierapolis; and the unknown “disciple of the apostles” who wrote the *Epistle to Diognetus* in answer to objections raised by him against Christianity. The aim of these writers, like that of the apostles themselves, is still a prevailingly practical and hortatory one. But Christian literature was gradually forced into a more scientific groove by the conflict which the church had presently to wage with paganism. To this cause we owe the numerous *Apologies* penned during and subsequent to the second century. The controversies with Gnostics and Judaizers in the third century gave a still more decidedly scientific cast to Christian theology.

The aim of the Apologists was to defend the Christian religion as a theistic and moral conception of the world based upon revelation. Viewing the Old Testament as the source of dogma, and holding the doctrine of human freedom and responsibility, they were strenuously opposed to Gnosticism. The radical difference between the Apologetic and Gnostic philosophers appeared in their respective treatment of Holy Scripture and of Christian tradition. The former were content to know that they had here a revelation which could satisfy men’s minds and make them lead a good life; whereas the

¹ The writings ascribed to Barnabas and Hermas are probably spurious, and the letters of Ignatius partially so.

latter critically examined the Old Testament to see how far it coincided with gospel teaching. Regarding Christianity as the absolute religion, the Gnostics set themselves to incorporate with it whatever commended itself to them as good, and to rid it of association with whatever they judged to be inferior. The Apologists, on the other hand, were above all desirous to see the Christian tradition established as the ultimate authority in the sphere of religion and morals. But while the Apologists were opposed to Gnosticism, they nevertheless allied themselves to Greek philosophy. This enabled them to explain Christianity to the educated, and to formulate the truth of the gospel in such a way as to commend it to thoughtful men everywhere. They presented it as the rational religion, which has its source in the one God, who is a Spirit; as the religion of liberty and true morality; as a spiritual religion which dispenses with the display of outward ceremonial; and finally as a religion founded on the impregnable rock of revelation. They boldly declared Christianity to be the divinely attested embodiment of the highest truth, as that had already commended itself to men's minds, and in doing so dealt the death-blow to polytheism and all its works, without raising any question as to the historical traditions of the pagan world. By the help of Christianity, which used it as a weapon in its own interests, Greek philosophy was now to burst the fetters of its "polytheistic past," and, abandoning the proud pedestal on which it stood as the monopoly of the learned, was to enter on a new career of service to a wider circle of humanity.

During the second century Christianity underwent practically the same treatment as Judaism had done at the hands of the Jewish-Alexandrian philosophers, and especially of Philo. These Jewish Hellenists had interpreted the religion of Jehovah to the Greeks as the highest philosophy; and now the Apologists similarly made "the marvelous attempt to present Christianity to the world as the religion which is the true philosophy, and as the philosophy which is the true religion."² This process was rendered easier from the circumstance that the Stoic philosophy was itself gradually becoming a religion through its quest for a dogmatic position which should serve as a working principle both of religion and of morals. Chris-

² Harnack, *History of Dogma*, English translation, Vol. II, p. 173.

tianity seemed to offer precisely the certainty for which philosophers longed, and to it they accordingly turned. While in the hands of the Gnostic minority Christianity was converted into a Hellenic religion for the cultured few, the church generally valued above all else that absolute morality by the identification of which with the Christian faith the Apologists sought to undermine polytheism. Even among the latter, however, Platonic influences were also at work, and although in the philosophy of the age the rationalistic and moral element predominated over the mystic and religious, Neoplatonism was already beginning to emphasize the thought of redemption and the necessity for a higher truth than the merely moral, in order to the removal of antagonisms insoluble by reason itself.

According to the *Chronicon* of Eusebius, the first quarter of the second century had just passed when Quadratus, a disciple "of the apostles," and Aristides, an Athenian philosopher, presented to the emperor Hadrian their respective *Apologies* for Christianity. Of the *Apology* of Quadratus there has been preserved only a single sentence, in which he refers to the survival down to his own day of persons whom Jesus had healed or raised from the dead. That of Aristides is known through a Syriac translation. Hitherto it had been customary to regard philosophy as subversive of gospel teaching (Col. 2:8), and it was a new departure when a professed philosopher came forward to defend Christianity as a philosophy. Its right to be so entitled he bases upon the rational and universally intelligible character of its contents. At the same time he maintains that, in so far as the truth of its doctrines is guaranteed by its supernatural origin, it stands in sharp contrast to philosophy. It is therefore at once rational and ultra-rational. Were it only the former, no revelation would be necessary; were it only the latter, it would not be a philosophy. The relation of Christianity to Greek philosophy is thus from the very outset of radical importance in the apologetic theology of the period.

Aristides gives the first place to an exposition of monotheism. He then classifies men as polytheists, Jews, and Christians, and explains how they severally arose. After giving a résumé of what the gospels teach with reference to Jesus Christ, he goes on to criticise polytheism, "barbarian" theology, and Greek writers and myths.

While Jewish monotheism and morality receive appreciative mention, the Jews are blamed for their elaborate ceremonial and their worship of angels. The *Apology* concludes with a eulogium upon the virtuous lives of Christians, and with a laudatory reference to their sacred writings.

Among the Apologists of the second century whose works have been preserved, the foremost place undoubtedly belongs to Justin Martyr, a native of Flavia Neapolis (the modern Nablûs) in Palestine, and apparently of Roman descent. The exact date of his birth is unknown. Devoting himself to the study of philosophy, he sought guidance in succession from the Stoics, the Peripatetics, and Pythagoreans, but with no satisfactory result. At length he became an ardent disciple of Plato. "The contemplation of ideas," he says, "furnished my mind with wings."³ While he was thus in love with the Platonic philosophy, the fearlessness of death manifested by the Christians, and the study of the prophetic writings, recommended to him by a venerable stranger whom he met by the seashore, attracted him to Christianity. His Platonism, however, colored his thinking to the last. Even after his conversion he continued to wear the philosopher's cloak (*pallium*), presumably with the view of winning men of culture for the gospel. In various parts of the world he preached salvation through the Christ of God as the only safe and salutary philosophy. At Ephesus he held his dialogue with Trypho the Jew, and in Rome his zeal for Christianity provoked such hostility in philosophical circles that Cresceus the Cynic, whom he had openly worsted in argument, plotted his destruction. He seems to have suffered martyrdom in the year 166, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, his last words being: "I am too little to say anything great of Christ."

Among the undoubtedly genuine works of Justin which have come down to us are his two *Apologies*, of which the *Second* is perhaps only a part of the *First*.⁴ These writings, which are conceived in a thoroughly Christian spirit, are essentially apologetic rather than theological. They are characterized by fearless advocacy of the claims of Christians to just and rational treatment at the hands of

³ Dialogue with *Trypho*, chap. 2.

⁴ In this case we must regard the *Second Apology* mentioned by Eusebius as lost.

their rulers, and throw valuable light upon the relations subsisting in Justin's day between the Christian and heathen worlds.

The *First Apology* dates from about 140 A. D., and is addressed to the emperor Antoninus Pius and his sons. The writer, although representing himself simply as a Christian, not as a philosopher, appeals to them as reasonable beings, reputed to be "pious and philosophical," and asks whether it is consistent with either piety or philosophy to butcher innocent men, as if they were traitors or felons, merely because they bore the name of Christian. He warns them that such conduct is strictly analogous to the blunder perpetrated by those who condemned Socrates, and demands that each Christian should be judged according to his own life, and punished only when judicial investigation has proved him to be worthy of punishment. After this preliminary expostulation, Justin proceeds to examine the different charges brought against Christians. He shows that they are not atheists, seeing they worship "the true God, the Father of righteousness," and that, so far from being rebels, they are the best friends of the empire, inasmuch as to look for a human kingdom would be to deny Christ. The teaching of Jesus on chastity, love to all men, giving to the poor, etc., is adduced to demonstrate the futility of calling Christians evil-doers. Their pure lives are triumphantly contrasted with heathen morality, as is Christ himself with the pagan deities. In the latter part of his work Justin sets himself to prove, on the one hand, that only Christian doctrines are true, and that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and teacher of men; and, on the other, that through the instrumentality of the demons heathen poets and priests were enabled to arrive at a partial caricature of the facts of the incarnation. To the *Apology* are appended three letters from Roman emperors on behalf of the Christians, in order to show that there was a precedent for honorable action on the part of Antoninus Pius in the direction desired. At the same time Justin boldly asserts that the persecuting measures of the rulers, if adhered to, will bring upon them the judgment of God.

In the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, which is possibly modeled upon the *Dialogues* of Plato, but is more probably a dialogue actually held, Justin's object is to prove that Jesus is the Messiah of the Old Testament, and to refute Jewish arguments against

Christianity. Christ is the new lawgiver, in whom the old law has been fulfilled and abrogated; and by observing the new law we may make ourselves acceptable to God. There is no declaration of free forgiveness through Christ as Redeemer; on this point the famous Apologist is defective.

Although Justin had a scholarly acquaintance with biblical as well as classical literature, he was no systematic theologian. The day of dogmatic precision and accurate definition was not yet. What is reflected in his writings is the simple faith of those early days, which, without drawing any formal distinction between the two natures, believes Jesus to be very God and very man. In his *Apologies* there is a frank acceptance of the central truths of Christianity. There is but one God, unchangeable and eternal (I, 13), unbegotten and impassible (I, 25), having ineffable glory and form (I, 9), the Creator (I, 7), Lord and Father of all (I, 32), who cares for his creatures and of his goodness acts out of regard for men (I, 10, 28). Jesus Christ was the Son of God, became man, was crucified, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven (I, 21, 42). While not attempting to expound the significance of the incarnation, Justin introduces the Platonic idea of the Logos in such a way as to suggest an explanation (I, 5, 46). According to his conception, the Logos is a divine person, through whom God created and arranged all things (II, 6). The Logos, moreover, was the inspirer of heathen sage as well as of Hebrew prophet. "On account of the seed of reason implanted by nature in every race of men" (II, 8), Heraclitus, Socrates, etc., although not enjoying "the knowledge and contemplation of the whole word which is Christ," nevertheless lived in the *partial* enjoyment of the Word diffused among men. Philosophers, poets, and historians "each spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word" (II, 13).⁵ This idea of the higher life in man being the seed of reason or the germ of the Word is the most striking and original in Justin's writings. "Reason," which through Socrates had condemned superstition among the Greeks, took bodily shape in the Socrates of the barbarians, "the teacher Christ" (I, 4). While

⁵ This notion, according to which the nobler spirits of the pagan world were virtually regarded as Christian before Christ, and all that was good in pre-Christian thought and life was linked on to Christianity, was afterward more fully developed by the Platonists of Alexandria.

no speculative proof can be given of this statement, it is amply confirmed by the witness of prophecy. Christ is not, however, like Socrates, the mere instrument of "reason," but the power of the ineffable Father; and his disciples, unlike those of the philosophers, are raised above the fear of death (II, 10, 11). The reason which created and arranged the world became incarnate in order to draw all men to itself, and its doctrines may be apprehended and put to the proof by learned and unlearned alike. The relation of philosophy to Christianity is thus, according to Justin, neither one of identity nor one of contrast; it is that of an instalment to the whole. In this way he emphasizes the superiority of Christianity. While the moving impulse of every manifestation of the reasonable has been the divine reason, yet, apart from revelation, none can ever know the whole truth, or attain to certainty, or throw off the yoke of the demons. Before the teaching of the prophets, confirmed by Christ and accessible to all, mere human philosophy must vanish as the stars before the rising sun.

The next Christian Apologist was Tatian. Although an Assyrian by birth, he was well versed in Greek literature, and followed the profession of a traveling "sophist" or rhetorician. Dissatisfied with what he saw of the pagan philosophies and religions, and with the hollow insincerity, vain pretensions, and groveling aims of their adherents, he was yearning for some loftier ideal of life and conduct when, as it chanced, he fell in with the Old Testament. The perusal of the Scriptures, their monotheistic doctrine, and the daily life of Christians as witnessed by him in Rome, led him to reject the Greek in favor of the "barbarian" philosophy. His chief concern is rather to exhibit Christianity as truth opposed to error than to secure fairer treatment for Christians.

In his *Address to the Greeks*, written after his conversion about the middle of the second century, he uses all the resources of Greek rhetoric to brand Greek philosophy in general as a mass of soul-destroying doctrines, and to exalt Christianity as the essence of heavenly wisdom; while at the same time he shows his contempt for Greek tastes by deliberately transgressing the most ordinary canons of style. In no other polemical treatise of the second century is there such a frank repudiation of Hellenic culture and usages, which are alleged

to have been mostly borrowed from the despised barbarians (I, 2). Tatian was especially attracted by two things in Christianity—its clear testimony to the one God as opposed to polytheism, and its precepts with regard to renunciation of the world. Yet, in spite of his critical attitude toward philosophy, and his advocacy of the religion of revelation as the one source of truth, he remained unconsciously a Platonic thinker. He dwells much on the doctrine of the Logos, and views Christianity as “the philosophy in which, by virtue of the doctrine of the Logos revelation through the prophets, the rational knowledge that leads to life is restored.”⁶ No radical distinction, apparently, is made between prophetic revelation and revelation through Christ. To Tatian the truth of Christianity is proved by its antiquity, as well as by the intelligibility of its contents. Greek philosophy he declares to be a plagiarized distortion of Moses and the prophets (XL), and no more to be esteemed than the absurd mythological fables which disgraced the name of religion. With Tatian agrees the unknown writer of the short *Address to the Gentiles*, who says that Christianity as the Logos-inspired wisdom “produces neither poets, nor philosophers, nor rhetoricians; but it makes mortals immortal, and men gods, and transports them from the earth into super-Olympian religions.”

The *Address* of Tatian was probably written in Greece, but the author again found his way to Rome, where (apparently at this juncture) he formed an acquaintance with Justin, whose disciple he became, and whom he greatly revered. His own activity as a teacher was not, however, relaxed, and Rhodon, the controversial writer who afterward opposed Marcion, was his pupil. After Justin's death, perhaps for lack of his restraining influence, Tatian's oriental sympathies led to the severance of his connection with the Catholic Church. He adopted views of a gnostic type, and disseminated them both orally and by his writings.⁷ This roused the suspicion and antagonism of orthodox Christians, and in the year 172 they ceased to have fellowship with him. His errors were indeed of a somewhat glaring order. He distinguished the demiurge, the creator

⁶ Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. II, p. 192.

⁷ Except the *Address to the Greeks*, and the *Diatessaron*, a mixed gospel based upon a free construction of our four gospels, only a few fragments of what Jerome calls Tatian's “countless volumes” have been preserved.

of the world and giver of the Mosaic law, from the Supreme God, to whom we owe the gospel; he maintained that, although everything existed in Him potentially, God was absolutely alone before the creation of the world; he held the doctrine of Aeons, and asserted the perdition of Adam. What lay at the root of all his heresies, however, was his desire to lay a theoretical foundation for his doctrine of the necessity of absolute renunciation of the world as a Christian duty. Under his system wine, animal food, and marriage were entirely forbidden. He connected himself with the ascetic sect of the "Encratites." As one reputed to combine the heresies of Marcion and Valentinus, he soon became a target for Christian writers generally. The place and date of his death are unknown.

Another Apologist of the second century was Athenagoras, a philosopher of Athens, who had become a convert to Christianity. According to Philip of Side, he lived under Hadrian and Antoninus, was head of the catechetical school at Alexandria, having preceded Pantænus in that office, and was the teacher of Clement. Philip's further description of Pantænus as the pupil of Clement shows that no reliance can be placed upon his statement as a whole, although his assertion that Athenagoras was led to embrace Christianity while reading the Scriptures in order to refute them is in itself quite credible. Almost nothing positive is known regarding this Apologist beyond what is stated in the title of his principal work, which describes it as the "embassy (*πρεσβεία*) of Athenagoras the Athenian, a philosopher and a Christian, concerning the Christians, to the emperors Marcus Aurelius, Antoninus, and Lucius Aurelius Commodus, conquerors of Armenia and Sarmatia, and, more than all, philosophers." This points to 176 or 177 A. D. as the date of this apology. The author defends the Christians against the charges of atheism, cannibalism, and licentiousness, and contrives at the same time to make a trenchant exposure of the absurdities connected with pagan polytheism and mythology. Athenagoras does not, like Justin, apply the term "philosophy" to Christianity. He contends, however, that Christian doctrines should meet with the same tolerance as the speculations of philosophy. Were Christians guilty of practical atheism like that of Diagoras, who "chopped up the wooden statue of Hercules to boil his turnips," and "openly declared that there was no God at all,"

they might with reason, he admits, be pronounced "atheists." In fact, however, the charge of atheism leveled at Christians might with equal justice have been brought against the greatest philosophers of every school. Yet, as he produces examples to show, both poets and philosophers were free to say and write what they pleased concerning the Deity, whereas Christians were deprived of this liberty by law. He demands that such an anomaly should cease, and that they should be permitted to give expression to their beliefs without molestation from the state. Evidently he regards the intelligence and piety of the emperors as capable of gauging the truth of Christian doctrine, which he is ready to submit to the test of reason. He keeps in the background, however, the incarnation and the crucifixion, and indeed, with the exception of the resurrection of the body, everything in Christianity that tended to prove a stumbling-block. Like the Apologists generally, he makes no distinction between the revelation given through the prophets and that given in Christ, but holds that revelation is the sole vehicle by which the truth is conveyed. Philosophers are not competent fully to apprehend it, because their views of divine things are the result of their own conjectures, and not of the Spirit's guidance. Athenagoras does not, with Justin, postulate a "seed of the Logos implanted by nature;" he directly affirms that the truly "reasonable" is determined by revelation, not by mere human opinion (VII). His remarks upon the Trinity, although not elaborated, have their own speculative interest. The Son is "the Logos of the Father, in idea and in operation;" and the Spirit "an effluence of God flowing from him, and returning back again like a beam of the sun" (X).

In the little work on the resurrection—the only other extant product of what is believed to have been a very fruitful pen—Athenagoras challenges unbelievers to show that such a thing is "either impossible for God or contrary to his will" (II), proceeds to answer definite objections brought against the doctrine (IV–XI), and then argues for it primarily from the divine purpose in man's creation, and the nature of man as so created (XII–XVII), and secondarily from the providential "reward or punishment due to each man in accordance with righteous judgment (XVIII–XXIII), and from the chief end of human existence (XXIV, XXV).

In point of ability Athenagoras is scarcely inferior to any of the early Apologists; in lucidity and elegance he excels them all. Yet his writings would appear to have soon sunk into oblivion; no mention is made of him by Eusebius, and very few references to him are to be found at all.

Toward the close of the second century another apology for Christianity was written by Theophilus, who was converted from heathenism by the study of Scripture, and became bishop of Antioch. It was addressed to his friend Antolycus, a learned and truth-loving pagan, and bears evidence of having been composed after 180 A. D. The scriptural and historical evidences for Christianity are discussed with greater fullness than in the apologies of Justin and others, although the work is framed much after the earlier models. Its value is somewhat impaired, however, by fanciful interpretations. Theophilus, who appears to have been the first patristic author to employ the word "Trinity," follows Tatian in drawing a sharp distinction between Christianity and philosophy. To him Christianity is not philosophy, but "the wisdom of God." Greek philosophers are at variance with Greek poets (II, 5), with one another (III, 7), and even with themselves (III, 3). Where they speak rightly regarding the divine providence and justice, they do so "against their will" (II, 37), and in imitation of Scripture (II, 12, 37). Only when free from the influence of the demons do they ever fall into line with prophetic teaching (II, 8). But God provided against their demon-inspired and worthless drivings (II, 15) by revealing his truth through the prophets, who committed it to writing. The gospel is a combination of the prophetic testimony regarding the origin of the world, the knowledge of God, and the nature of virtue. He makes no mention of Christ, but speaks of the activity of the Logos (*πνεῦμα*) as operative from the creation of the world, in this respect affording a contrast to Aristides, who, while affirming the revelation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ, is silent as to the pre-Christian activity of the Logos.

As regards the relation of Christianity to philosophy, theologically the first great bone of contention in the ancient church, the Greek Apologists held (1) that the truth is unascertainable by the unaided efforts of philosophers; (2) that whatever fragmentary notions of

truth there may be in philosophy are embraced and completed in Christianity, which is divine wisdom revealed of old by the prophets and summarized in Christ; (3) that such revelation of the rational and moral is necessitated by man's subjection to the demons; (4) that Christian truth approves itself by its intelligibility to all, and by its power to lift men up to a holy life. They claimed for Christianity everything true and good, as well as a priority in point of origin over all human systems; and in their writings, through the union of religion with intellectual culture, it "served itself heir to antiquity."

The word "dogma" in the technical sense was first applied to the Christian faith by the Apologists. They merely mapped out the field of "dogmatic," however, and, as Harnack says, "wrote the prolegomena for every future theological system in the church." Christianity as revealed philosophy, the truth of which is guaranteed by Christ, consists, according to the Apologists, of three doctrines: (1) There is one God, who is the Father and Lord of the world. (2) In his goodness God delivers man from the demons. (3) God will judge the world, and will punish the wicked with death and reward the good with immortality. The most noticeable feature in this short creed is its failure to apprehend the importance of the person of Christ as Redeemer. Justin, indeed, conceives him as now reigning in glory and as the future Judge, and identifies him with the Son of God, but even he does not seem to perceive in the incarnation of the Logos the real basis of the immortality bestowed upon mortals, being content to regard it as the necessary consequence of knowledge and virtue.